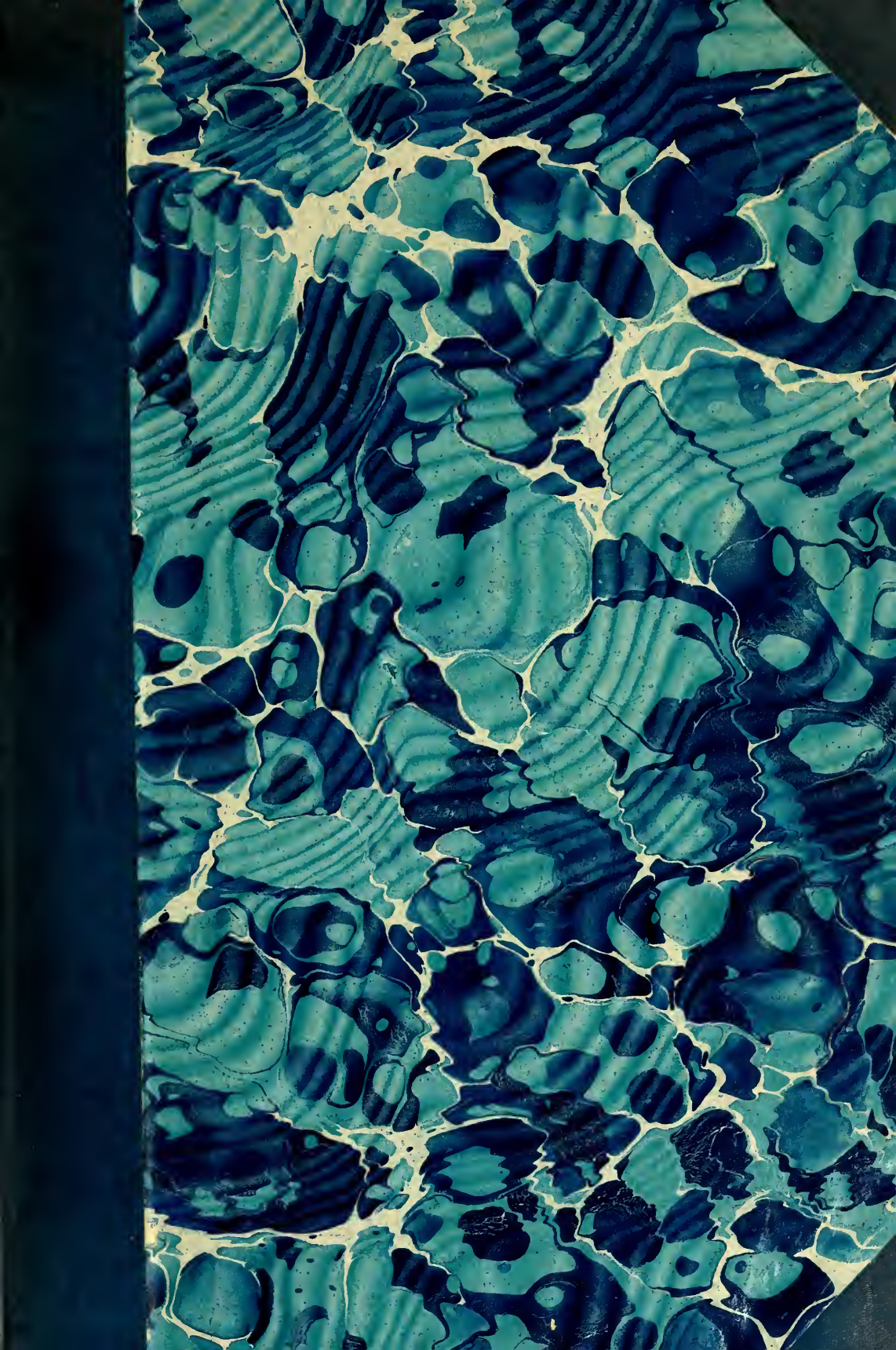

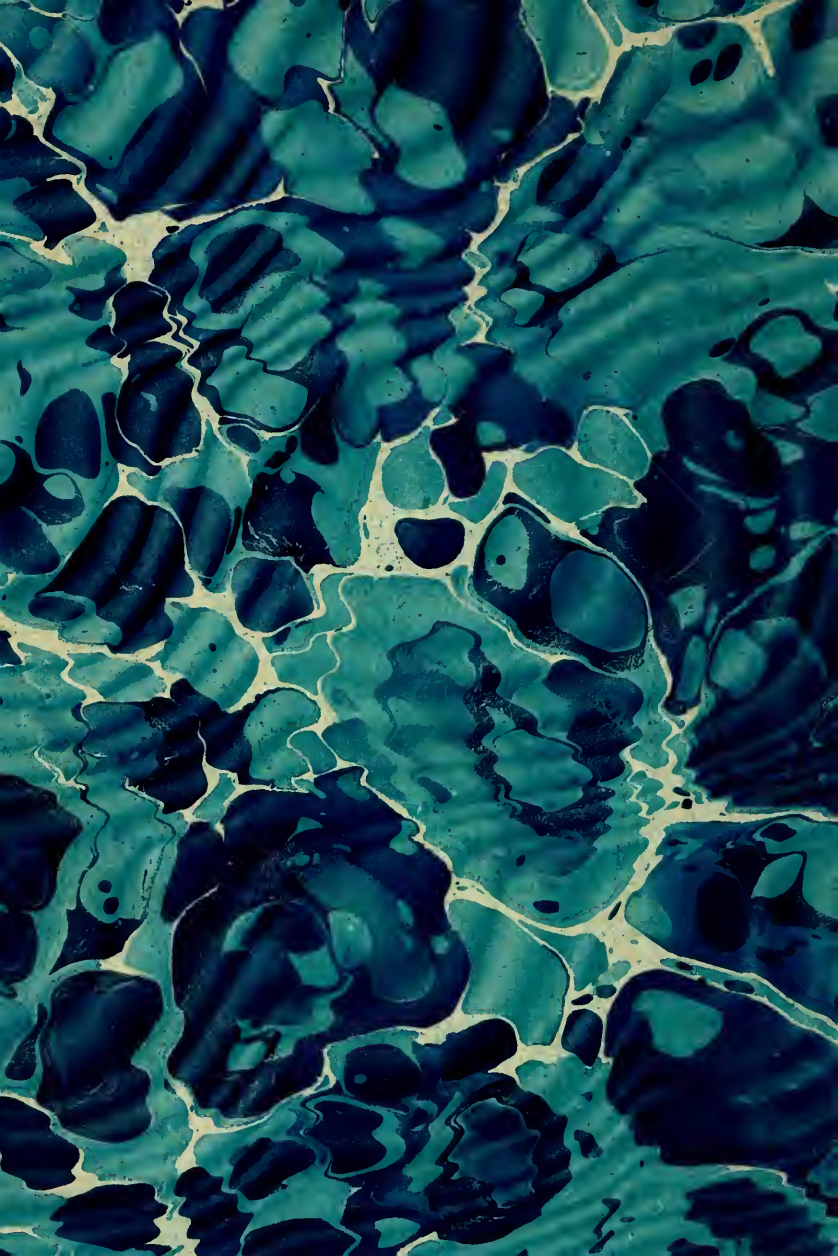

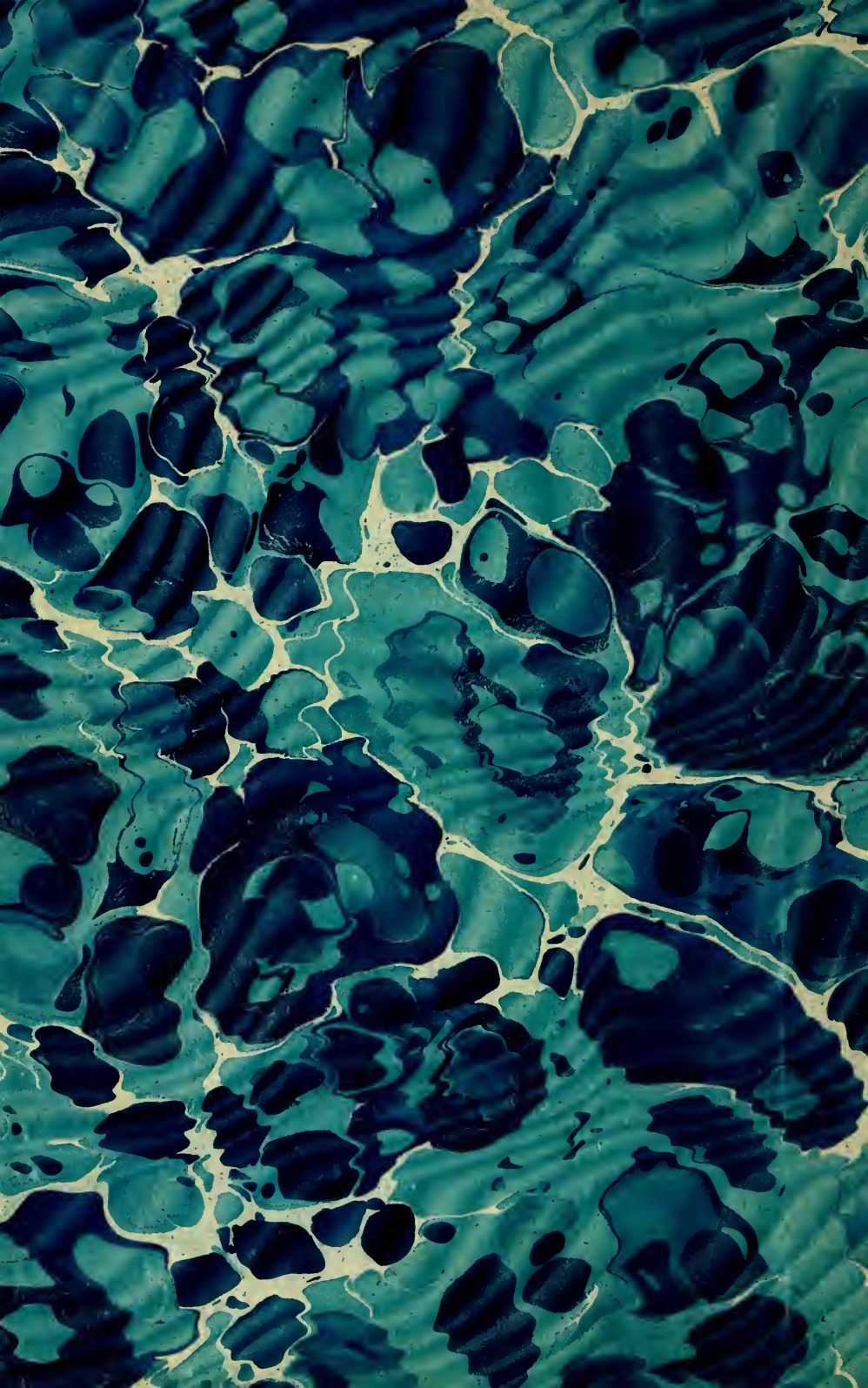

THE

UNITY CHURCH FRATERNITY:

A SERMON,

BY ROBERT COLLYER,

PREACHED MARCH 14, 1869.

CHICAGO:
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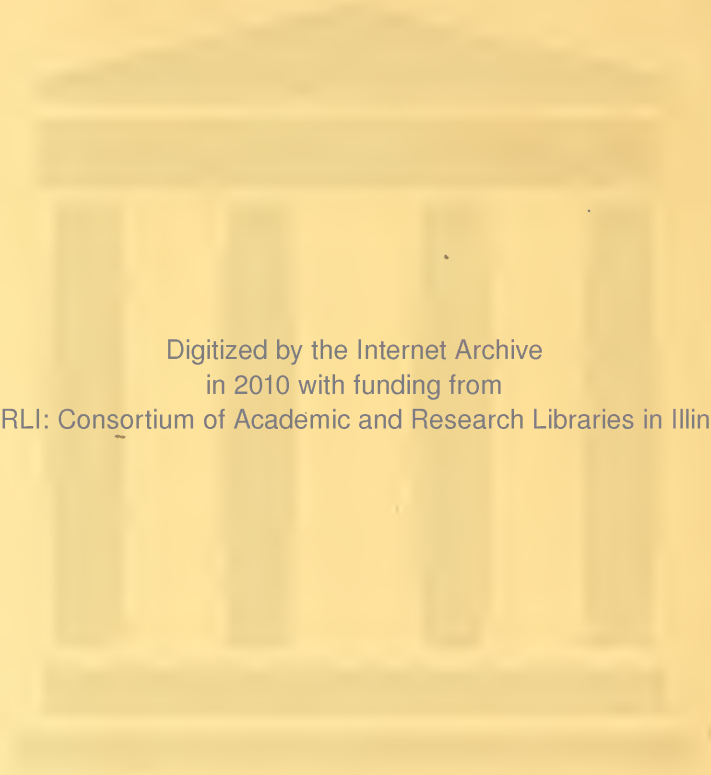

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UNITY CHURCH FRATERNITY.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!---Psalms cxxxiii, i.

And I shall speak to you from this text, as I gave notice last Sunday, on the "Unity Church Fraternity."

First—On the reasons for it.

Second—On the nature of it: and

Third—On its accomplishment up to this time.

I. And, first, the Unity Church Fraternity, as I think of it, is rooted in and springs from the longing that was in my heart, and in the hearts of the rest of its members, to find out some way to the formation of a society, without an atom of the religious caste that generally distinguishes the societies that spring up within churches; able to do a work as good as any of these do, in every way, yet still to be free from all sanctimonious egotism, and think as little of what it had done as would be consistent with its pure welfare.

I think it is fair to say that the genius of a Church like this does not seek its expression in Societies, while its condition, at the same time, imperatively demands them. If I may take my ten years' experience for a guide, I will venture to say, that a great number of men and women, who prefer this Church above all others, miss it when circumstances take them away from the city, and come back to its services with a keen enjoyment, would still be very well content to attend

this one service, once a week, drink in the good of it, walk out the moment it is over, without saying "how do you do?" to a living soul, and so keep on from years' end to years' end, always cultivating the kindliest heart toward all that come here, but beyond that, as indifferent as if the Church was a hall, the congregation a crowd, and the sermon a lecture on any secular subject. And it is no doubt true that this can be done more easily in Unity Church than in almost any Church of which I have any knowledge. Other congregations have a sort of inside and outside membership—a congregation, and then within the congregation a Church; and it is expected that the Church shall assume certain duties, as the price of its peculiar endowments. We have, so far, had no such inside membership; and it has been impossible for the minister, on that ground, to ask his people to do more than be in their places, when he was in the pulpit. For week-night meetings, and Society meetings, for every sort of thing that must be done, the minister can go to the Church proper—when there is one—as the housekeeper goes to her wood-pile. He is the overseer of a company that has pledged itself to labor in what is called the "Lord's Vineyard," in all times, seasons, and circumstances. Now, in such informal membership, as we have found possible, so far, there is no such pledge implied. I cannot go to a man or woman in this Church, and, on the ground that they belong to a peculiar people, ask them to do a single thing. Every stroke of work, all social amenities, and money for all purposes, must come out of your kindly hearts, and by your willing hands, or they cannot come at all. You can come to these Sunday services, go back home clear, and keep clear for the rest of your natural life, from every other soul in the Church; and yet I shall have no right to say that you are not as intimately a member, so far as our covenant goes, as any other person. This is a free Church, certainly, in that respect; for it lets every man do that which is right in his own eyes, as they did in Israel, in the times of the Judges.

But, then, nobody can doubt what a Church like this amounts to, if this be all there is to it. Aside from all questions of duty,

it is the merest rope of sand, that can be blown together by the breath of a minister: and there is no reason that I know of why it should not fall to pieces when his breath ceases to blow: and if there should be no more of a Church than that, when I was nearly through, I might feel that I had done good to persons, but my ministry, as an organized religious influence, was a failure.

But not a few have always felt that this was wrong; it was not enough to come to Church on Sunday, and then say "that is all I care for;" for, so far as our little Unity Church world goes, that would be as if the great world should be content to eat all the grapes and apples that grow, but never give a thought to the vines and trees, or get all the good of them through this whole generation, but provide none for the next. So, the reason for the "Unity Church Fraternity" lies not only in the peculiar organization of this Church, but in its needs —the need to do something toward making that an institution, which might otherwise come to be a destitution. So far as I was concerned in the Fraternity, I longed, especially at the outset, to gather a society of young people, that should include, if possible, all the young people in the Church, and all that might come in, give them a chance to know each other, to render kindness in all ways, gracious and good, to all members, and to open its heart in sympathy and charity to that human want and sorrow in our city, where the sufferers do not seek assistance, but would die and make no sign if they were not sought out,—the "Lord's poor," as distinguished from our own poor, so nobly cared for now by the Citizens' Relief. Now, I need not recite in this place how, from the beginning, Unity Church has never failed in noble charities, or in a fair social life, that has had its own good influence. If there be any blame, I will take it to myself, because more has not been done. I declare in the face of the sun, that you have done all I have ever asked for, except to send enough teachers into the Sunday School. I will confess that I have sometimes refrained from asking when I feared it would be no use; but what I have really asked for, this Church has done—has done well, when I

have done decently, and, I can hardly doubt, will do better if I only set the example. Still, it seemed especially essential to organize our young people. I longed to see them in a great company together, cultivating this social element, so essential in all good Churches; to have them coöperate together also in true charities, while their life was still in its first bloom—a period when young people generally care for nothing but to have a good time; and then, in the course of time, when those who are the fathers and founders of the dear good place begin to fail, have a compacted organization growing up to its prime, that would take hold afresh, let us retire into the corners of our pews, and rejoice during what little time we had to live; beside, in seeing them do better than we do, and the little one become a thousand.

II. This, then, has already indicated the *nature* of the Fraternity. It was to be a society without a creed—free from religious caste and cant—intent on two or three thoroughly wholesome objects—as free, as well organized, and cultivating a love as deep toward its mother, as the commonwealth of Massachusetts; or as well organized and devoted in its own way as any society is in the Church of Rome, without this freedom. It was not to be just a bundle of good works and social graces, done because this was a society formed for that purpose, but all this, and more, because the Society had a soul. It was my conviction then, as it is still, that those drawn together in Christian worship should be glad to come together for Christian work too. That a congregation can be a society; and the common sentiment, or conviction, be it one or the other, that brings people together round this pulpit on Sunday, should bring them together in followship on week-days.

So, resting in this belief, we said this "Fraternity" shall have a threefold purpose:—It shall seek, first, to do what Jesus Christ did first in his ministry to man; it shall seek the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind—shall set its fortune against their misfortune, its gladness against their dole—its good spirit shall penetrate to the heart of the dispirited; the beauty of its youth shall be given for their ashes; its grace shall

be a gospel to their deformity; and by such simple and unbroken light of religion as shines out of unworn hearts, it shall bring to those that sit in darkness a new trust.

I saw in a newspaper, a few days ago, some account of a hapless woman in London who was just then dead. The writer entered, with some minuteness, into the proof that the poor soul had been driven out of its tenement by the most appalling process of starvation: it was as sad a thing as I ever read in my life; and this was the saddest part of it, that in the room where the woman was found dead, only two things were found beside—a bit of salt, and a tract on the "Goodness of God." The thing was done within a month; it was in one of the latest London papers—it was horrible to me, beyond expression! it ought to drive every tract society out of London, and bolt the door on them, and take their money to buy bread, until this dreadful hunger of the starving poor in England is satisfied, or until they find a passage in the Gospels that shall read:—"Seeing that the multitudes were hungry, Jesus had compassion on them, and caused them to sit down, took the five barley loaves and two small fishes, and lifted up his eyes and blessed and brake them, and gave them to his disciples; and they eat the loaves and fishes, and gave each of the five thousand a religious tract." Right or wrong, this "Fraternity" was meant to be a society that should break the loaves and fishes first, and give them to the famishing; and let the tract business take care of itself, until there was ample time and money for both. And I don't know that I can do better, by way of illustration of the wisdom of this course, than tell you of the very last thing, so far as I know, that the "Fraternity" has done. Two or three weeks ago, a lady came to see me and tell me of a family that she believed to be in the sorest want. She brought a note about them from a schoolmistress. I went at once to see them, and found what I have never found before in this city, that they were people of our own persuasion, members of one of our well-known Eastern Churches, and had come to this city, and had fallen on evil days. The wife was left a widow; the son, who would then naturally have taken charge of the home, and

carried it on, with that grand, secluded, New England pride, that always fills my heart with tears—this son, who had already taken hold in that way, and was bearing the burden, was all at once disabled. Then the mother stepped to the front, took his place, and prepared, with one small lad to help her, to fight the battle. For about eight months, when I heard of it, she had stood fast, fighting the wolf with a needle. She called on none to help her, save God. When I went and said, "Do you want any succor?" if I had not been so sure that she did, I could easily have come away and said, "There is no particular need;" but when I sent a member of this "Fraternity," who knows directer ways to a woman's heart than I do, she heard what I will not tell, about that good fight in which the home had been ever more closely besieged: the widow's oil and meal failed utterly, and nothing was left but the unconquerable and unspeakable pride, that would dig while the hand could grasp, but still be ashamed to beg, because it had never been so in their family, and never could be. I said, this, I believe, is the very last thing this "Fraternity" has done, and one of the things it is doing now, to reinforce that forlorn hope, and save that noble and lofty poverty from its worst pain. And it illustrates, as well as anything can, this first thing in the nature of the "Fraternity"—its call to aid those to the uttermost who will not go to the Poor-master or the Citizen's Relief—who will not, in truth, go anywhere with the tale of their troubles, but are to be heard of in a whisper, and aided as though it was the very Christ who had come in *this* guise, to these that bear his name, as indeed, indeed, it is.

And just as good in its way is the second thing sought through this "Fraternity"—the power to welcome every stranger, young man or young woman, unknown, and knowing nobody, who may come within our gates. And to take the lowest ground that can be taken for this second aim, it was needful that this should be done for self-defence. It is an open secret, that in this city every effort is made, by some of the so-called orthodox Churches, to secure young men and women who come here to live, no matter whether they belong to them by religious affinity or not.

In these Churches there are well organized recruiting parties, thoroughly in earnest about their work; not over particular how it is done, so it be done; whispering to young persons the social consequence, and sometimes even the commercial advantage of joining their body; and a little more glad to get a young person of our persuasion than one of their own, because it is a sort of brand plucked out of the burning—and, then, they get the brand too.

In years past, the social consideration has told heavily against us. I can find in this city multitudes of men and women who were very good Unitarians, where our faith is popular, in New England, that instantly fell from grace when they got to Chicago, and found it struggling for life. They were glad to get all the good of the mother Church, where she had influence and affluence, but when they found one of her little ones in the wilderness, struggling to live, they left it to die. One aim, I say, was to meet this necessity among the young men and women. The temptation to desert us because we make a poor show is growing less every year with the growth of our cause; still, it is there, and other inducements are there, and this "Fraternity" is meant, in its measure, to be a tower of defence against them.

Then, again, the need was still more sacred to make a home, and give warm welcome to those that could neither be trained away nor tempted away from the Church of their choice. These, with all others, can find here a society to give them welcome and fellowship; and in joining it, also, they join with all the rest in providing, that if any member be sick and in need of anything—nurses, medical attendance, attention of any sort—this Association gladly gives it all; simply to let the members know what the need is, is to bring the instant remedy; and if there be no need at all, still, the Committee set apart for this purpose is to watch eagerly for any chance to send fruit, and flowers, and whatever beside that will put a gleam of sunlight into a sick-chamber. I must say, that for myself, I love this feature; it seems to me that, after its care of the shrouded and noblest poor, nothing is

greater or better. So many in a city like this are away from their homes, it is so lonely for them, and hard, if sickness takes them; and when they are well, it is so good to be identified with a good company of young persons of their own age, and have something of the home feeling, in this kindly relation, that I know of nothing better, anywhere, than such a plan.

And these two good elements leave little need for me to point out the third—very good in its way, also, and, so far, full of sweet uses—that provision, I mean for the entertainment, in all innocent ways, of those that belong, and of those the members see fit to invite to their entertainments.

If I venture, just here, to make a criticism, it is the only one I want to make—and I am not sure that there may not be good reason on the other side—but here it is: that, on the whole, the amusements of the "Fraternity" have been confined too much to one thing, that does not, like some books we hear of now and then, "blend amusement with instruction," that seems to have no connection at all with the mind, and will probably be dispensed with, except among children in a better state of existence. I only fear that this sort of entertainment has too much of a monopoly, in this third feature; and I am glad to believe that something is to be done in other directions. I know that other amusements can be invented just as pleasant, and certainly as profitable. I would have them all blended together in the sum of the year, and then that aim and element will be as good as the rest; and when we speak of amusements, we shall mean something beside this one form of amusement.

III. In speaking, thirdly, therefore, of the accomplishment of the "Fraternity" up to this time, I will mention this matter of amusements first. It is very good that there should be such a purpose, and with that single drawback—more apparent this winter than last—this purpose has been well carried out. I have looked in, now and then, on these social gatherings, and they have seemed to me to be the perfection of such entertainments, bright, and kindly, courteous, and gracious, with little that was meretricious, and all that was modest. I have no statistics about this matter; they would not be in place if I had them,

and we need none. It is enough to say that the "Fraternity" has amused itself to its heart's content, no doubt, and may be safely left to see to this part of its work, of its own instinct.

Faithfully, again, it has tried to do the second thing for which it came together; it has stood prepared to welcome every one that desired its fellowship; to make all feel the welcome of its spirit, and purpose; to pay every attention, in every case, to strangers; and to give of its abundance wherever there was a chance. No man or woman who has cared to join, has been refused membership; no man or woman joining has been refused fellowship; and none have been sick, if it was known, and been neglected. Generally, so well to do as to make it impossible to render direct assistance, this Society, I know, has always had a good longing at its heart to supplement all other means by its means of grace, in such things as will bring a bit of sunshine, as I said, into the sick-chamber, and make the sufferer feel that he still holds his place in the loving regard of his fellows. I do not say that in this the Society might not have done better, but it has done well, and will do better in the time to come, please God. In this purpose, then, these brethren dwell together in unity, and a good and pleasant thing it is.

But the greatest and best thing, to me, is the accomplishment of the "Fraternity" outside itself.

The Saturday Sewing School, now in its second winter, looks to this Society for its steady continuance. Good women, not of the "Fraternity," assist in it; but it is not unfair to say, that as things are now, if there was no such organization, there would be no Saturday Sewing School. Last winter, this School mustered 160 pupils, who made, among them, about 300 garments. Early this winter, the gentleman at the head of the North Star Mission came to see me, and to hear what we were doing for the Lord. I told him, among other things, we were teaching ignorant little girls to sew. He thought that was good; said he must have a school like that, and he has got one outnumbering this. I rejoice in it: I cannot see how they *can* teach any bad theology through the needle—the one great

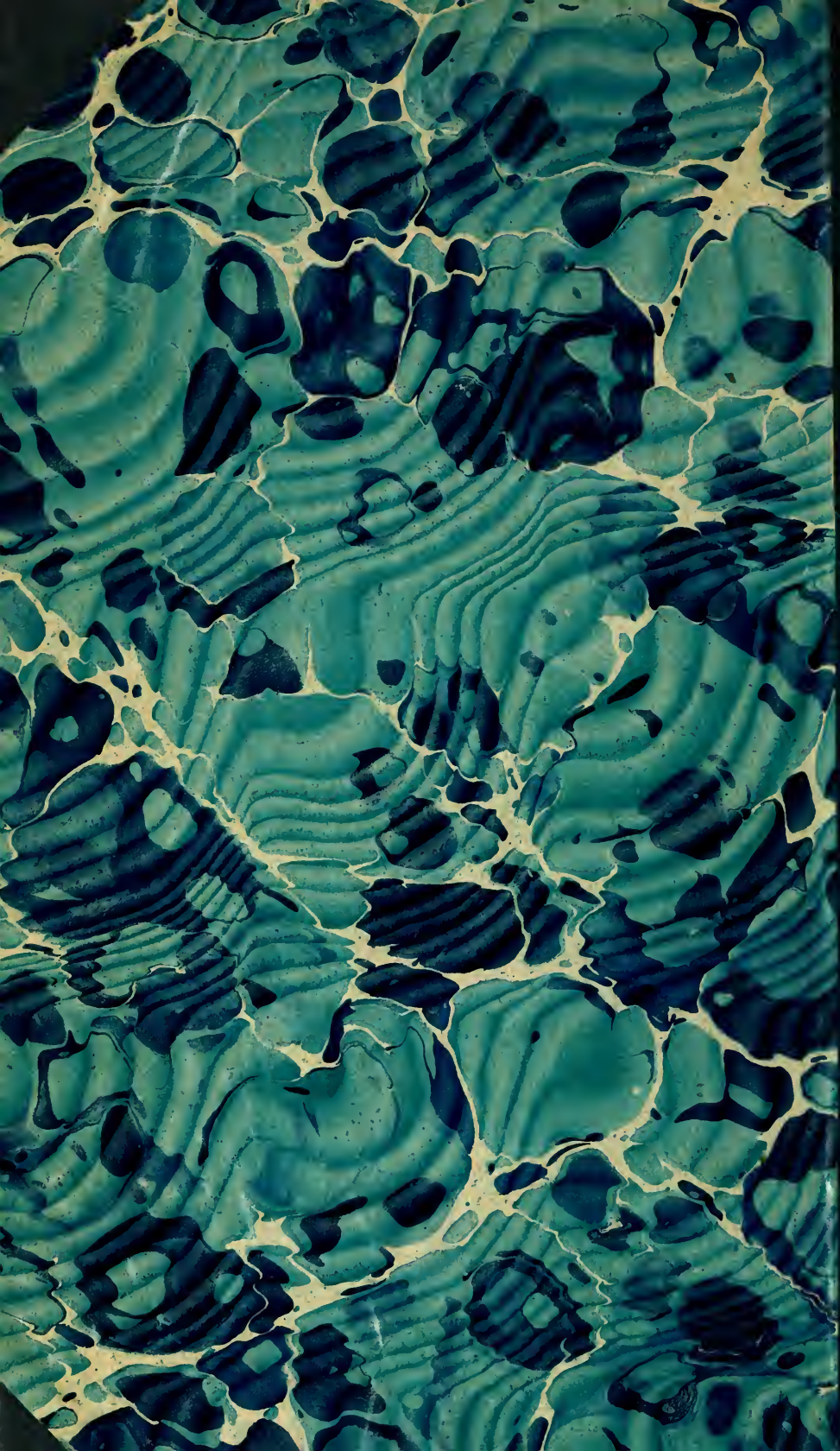
peculiarity, indeed, of the Baptist persuasion, I believe some of the ladies of the "Fraternity" are trying to instil into their pupils. This great school on Division Street has not reduced our numbers, however, we had 164 pupils yesterday. They meet in this lecture room every Saturday morning; and I want you to look in upon them. All the expenses of the Sewing School are now paid by this "Fraternity." Altogether, this Society has been able to give for its different objects, seventeen hundred and twenty-two dollars, twenty-seven cents. Out of this, it has contributed handsomely to the Hospital for Women and Children, in which it now provides for a bed. It has done a little for the Hospital for the Blind; it has bought two sewing machines for widows that are widows indeed; started them in that way, so that ever since then they have been able to take care of their children, and are paying for the machines by a trifle at a time; no interest, of course, being charged for the money. It has put out about three hundred dollars in temporary loans without interest, to good persons who were hard bested, and who are gradually paying back their sums, and will presently be out of debt: and shall I not mention gratefully, just here, that this "Fraternity" gave a hundred dollars to furnish the Pastor's study—"Bread cast upon the waters," to be seen, I trust, after many days. Once, I mentioned in this pulpit, a blind woman, deserted by her husband, and left with two children, a small cottage, an unconquerable heart, and a light shining in darkness. This woman has a warm place in the heart of this Society; it gives her generous help, that she can rely on weekly, is pulling her through her troubles: about two lots and a shanty, and before long, will set her on her feet as an independent woman, able to take care of herself, and owing nothing in this world but grateful love. Here is a man who speaks four languages, was in good circumstances, but lost his money, and then his health; has drifted into consumption; had to sell their clothing, furniture, everything to get bread for the wife and four children, and then was to be turned out of doors. The "Fraternity" has paid the rent, clothed the children, got a place for the eldest boy, and is feeding the poor

scholar's last days from blank destitution. Here is a man who was a prisoner at Andersonville, and got his death-stroke by the hardship, came home to find that he was useless: his wife and two children did what they could; when the "Fraternity" found them, they were destitute, and could do no more; but if he could get into Missouri, he thought he could work. Then, through the good grace of one in this Church, who always doubles the good of his gift by the abundant cheerfulness with which he gives, the broken man and family were sent to Missouri; and he lived until they got a shanty, preëmpted some land, eight miles from everywhere, and eight miles from everywhere the mother was when the husband and father died; and she had to lock the door and leave her two little ones in the house with the white death, and literally to stop her fingers in her ears, so as to shut out their cries, and then to run to the nearest settlement to find help to bury her dead. There they are to-day, with a home and a prospect, such as it is. Sometime, please God, they will be independent; they are infinitely better than beggars to-day, as they must have been but for their movement into the wilderness. Here is a woman, a widow, with four children, all small, always at work, never complaining, and possessing a cow that cubed wonderfully all she did. But the widow fell sick, could not get well, could buy no feed either, for her able and excellent assistant, and so could get no milk. Then, as I hear, she tried the associations, one by one, for a little aid. They sent their agents, who reported the cow, but not the dry udders; and very desperate things began to look when the "Fraternity" took hold, pulled them through, and now they go alone—cow and all.

These are some of the things this "Fraternity" has done, and is doing now, through the contributions and care of its one hundred and fifty-three members, or as many of them as take hold in good earnest, and pay up their subscriptions. What beside it does in sympathy, and the succor that comes from the heart, I cannot tell you. I only know this, that it is as wise, and tender, and delicate, in my opinion, as anything this world knows of: and I need only say this word about the whole mat-

ter beside, that the whole work is done without one penny of expense—done by these young folks themselves; no ninety per cent. of the charities devoured by the agents—not a solitary farthing. The maximum of assistance, according to our means, at the lowest minimum of expenditure ever attained. These disciples distribute the loaves and fishes, and find themselves.

Finally, for this "Fraternity," I want to make a brief plea. When it was started, another Society, the Liberal Christian League, was started also, that, I hoped, might take in all that did not join the Young People's Society, and so get the whole Church compacted together in a good, earnest fashion. That League has a most honorable record: it was given up, as everybody knows, in the hope of uniting all the liberal elements in our city in a common work. The result has convinced me that we made a great mistake with the best intentions, and spent a great deal of money for a very small result. Now, I know no reason why this "Fraternity" should not consist of all the elder and younger members of the Church together. I think both elements would be better for both. I wish it could include now the entire congregation, old and young. All that has been done might then be done on a larger scale, other things that this Society has not thought of touching might be done also —such things as were done by the League—and then that little touch of isolation that I have observed between the two elements, the elder and younger, in this Church, would instantly disappear. Isolation, it is now, but not difference; then, the Church would be one body, with one soul. I do not want to start anything like the league again, if we can all work together in one society. I would infinitely prefer this plan to any other; and I want to see it, because I do fear that not a few of us are growing careless: we are willing to let those go ahead that will, while we take our ease and mind our own business. But I tell you, that in these mighty times, when our city and country is at white heat, pouring the hot metal into the moulds, and bound to harden by and by, we are not justified, let alone glorified, in sitting still and letting things that have a moral purpose take their course, but in standing steadily by the moulds, and seeing

that the white metal assumes the right shape. Some are working at this new Church—I am proud and thankful for their devotion—some are working in other ways—these ways are high, and good, and indispensable. Thankfully, I say too, that in the Ladies' Sewing Society, and the Sunday School there are willing hands, and wise heads, and warm hearts; but I think these altogether do not take in half the strength of this Church. I would join hands, and leave nobody out. I count it of my own poverty as a minister that you do not come to me and say, I am not satisfied to hear preaching and pay pew rent, I want to know what I can do to promote the great common purpose of our Church. O! friends, if ever we come to that, I think I shall be then ready to die, only, I shall want to live, to see what will come of such a devotion. To bid the whole earth "behold how good and pleasant it is for brethern to dwell together in unity," for there the Lord commands his blessing, even life for evermore. To see our Church as "a city set on a hill, that cannot be hid," and our light shining before men, "so that they, seeing our good works, shall glorify our Father which is in Heaven."

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